

The Refugee Situation and Catholic Teaching

Here are a couple of press releases from the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference which outline the Christian response to the controversy of refugee and asylum seeker politics. We need to assess all our responses and attitudes according to the principles espoused in these releases.

Welcoming Christ in Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons: Pastoral Guidelines **7 June 2013 Media Release**

On June 6, 2013, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People together with “*Cor Unum*” published the Document; “Welcoming Christ in Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons: Pastoral Guidelines”.

The document sets pastoral guidelines and aims to create awareness of the context of forced migration. The document also highlights the weaknesses and ambiguities of the strategies that the international community and national States have developed to prevent and oppose the phenomenon.

“In regards to refugees and asylum seekers, the document emphatically asserts that *the first point of reference should not be the interests of the State or national security, but the human person*» [n. 58] ” said Fr Pettenà National Director of ACMRO and Consulter of the Pontifical Council.

“The document is particularly timely in an election year where both major parties appear intent on dehumanising asylum seekers for

political gain" he said. The most vulnerable are not simply those who are in a needy situation to whom we kindly offer an act of solidarity, but they are members of our family with whom we have a duty to share the resources we have [n. 10].

"The document also outlines the duty to offer hospitality and welcome especially in societies hostile to them," said Fr Pettenà "the ecclesial community is called to become a sign of contradiction and promote altruism or even heroic acts when offering hospitality [n. 84]".

The document encourages receiving communities to form an authentic culture of welcome, where hospitality is seen not so much as a task, but as a way of living and sharing [n. 82]".

"We do recognise that there are different attitudes in our community towards welcoming refugees and asylum seekers" said Fr Pettenà "the document, reminds Christian communities that to remain authentic and credible, Christians must look to Jesus Christ as their constant point of reference."

Blessed John Paul II, reminds us that the words of Jesus "*I was a stranger and you welcomed me*" (MT 25:35-37) are "not a simple invitation to charity, this is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ (NMI, 49) [n. 84]".

The Human Dignity of Asylum Seekers comes before National Interests.

July 22, 2013 Media Release.

The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office call for Australia's asylum seeker policies to be inspired by the centrality of

human dignity and the obligation to care for our brothers and sisters who, in their desperation, ask for our welcome and assistance.

“Each and every one of us must rise above indifference and have the courage to open our hearts to asylum seekers, to listen to their hopes, to empathise with their despair, and to welcome them in to our community.” said Bishop Gerard Hanna, Australian Catholic Bishop’s Delegate for Migrants & refugees.

“Our thoughts and active involvement is accompanied by our prayerful support for these people who have endured so much in the hope of making a life for themselves in Australia and who will now be denied this opportunity” said Bishop Hanna.

“The new resettlement arrangements with Papua New Guinea are based on the premise that it is wrong for people fleeing from persecution to seek asylum in Australia” said Bishop Hanna “this is fundamentally untrue.”

We have the duty as members of one human family to help those who arrive on our shores seeking asylum and to strive with all our resources to assist them no matter how inconvenient this may prove to be”, he said.

“We also share the concerns raised by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands” said Bishop Hanna “that Australia is asking the people of Papua New Guinea to show a level of generosity far beyond their economic means.”

“An alternative way to prevent tragedies at sea is to accept more refugees from source countries and provide the possibility and the hope of reaching Australia through a regular legal pathway” said Fr Pettenà National Director of ACMRO and Consulter of the Pontifical Council.

“At the root cause of forced migration is the failure of various Nations to uphold human rights and respect human dignity” said Fr Pettenà “the ultimate solution is to seek justice, uphold the rule of law and encourage all other Nations to do likewise.”

“Full respect and care for asylum seekers must come before the National and political interests of any country” he said “importantly in this context, we must uphold our international human rights obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention.”